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Sent: Sun 9/16/2018 3:12:22 PM
Subject: The Bomb In Our Back Yard – Ahimsa Porter Sumchai MD – Medium

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The Bomb In Our Back Yard

Ahimsa Porter Sumchai MD Aug 31, 2009

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This article was originally published in the SF Bayview Newspaper August 31, 2009:
<http://sfbayview.com/2009/08/-the-bomb-in-our-back-yard/>.

“The World’s Greatest Shipping Yard” at Hunters Point

On September 14, 2018 GreenAction for Health & Environmental Justice issued the following statement in response to discovery of a highly radioactive radium emitting deck marker found adjacent to homes at the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard:

Today it is clear that the decade of claims by local, state and federal government agencies and Lennar developers that there was no radioactive contamination at Parcel A of the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard were completely false.

It is unclear if the repeated bold and false claims by government officials and agencies were knowing lies, or were the result of incompetence and negligence. We intend to find out.

The truth is out. Highly radioactive contamination was present next to homes where residents were promised there was no radiation.

The truth is that information provided for many years by whistleblowers and community members about reckless and illegal activities during the “cleanup” of the federal Superfund site at the Hunters Point Shipyard was accurate.

Yet the cover-up continues. GreenAction learned three days ago that a radioactive deck marker was reportedly discovered and worked to confirm it. Our attorneys contacted government agencies but got no response.

Yesterday, the Navy and California Department of Public Health confirmed a radioactive deck marker was discovered on Friday, September 7, 2018—one week ago. The government did not reveal this finding until September 13, 2018—and only informed Parcel A residents not other nearby residents.

We believe the only reason the government finally admitted this discovery is because we found out and were about to blow the whistle on this alarming news.

It is time for truth, transparency, accountability, and a totally comprehensive cleanup of the entire shipyard and adjacent areas—with full independent community oversight.

No one should live next to or on top of radioactive and toxic waste!

Bradley Angel—Executive Director of GreenAction for Health & Environmental Justice leads the historic movement in Bayview Hunters Point at the May 2018 Hearing of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors calling for comprehensive retesting of the Hunters Point Shipyard

Whistle blowers testimony drives the unearthing of “The greatest case of eco-fraud in US history” at the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard

“On Sunday, the 15th of July, about noon, we were at Hunters Point and they put on us what we now know was the atomic bomb.”—Capt. Charles B. McVay III, U.S. Navy

commanding officer, USS Indianapolis (from the Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center)

The atom bomb “Little Boy” sailed from the Hunters Point Shipyard and on Aug. 6, 1945, was dropped on Hiroshima, killing 140,000 people by the end of that year. The USS Indianapolis, which carried the bomb across the Pacific, was sunk, with great loss of life, by a Japanese submarine on its return trip.

Heavy is the head that wears the crown! On Aug. 2, 1945, U.S. President Harry S Truman, acting on the advice of military and civilian advisers, gave the order to drop the atomic bomb on a Japanese target. On Aug. 6, the first bomb fell on Hiroshima; on Aug. 9, the second was dropped on Nagasaki in Western Japan. On Aug. 14, 1945, Japanese Emperor Hirohito agreed to an unconditional surrender, thus bringing to an end the final tragic combat theatre of World War II.

On Aug. 6, 2009, in commemoration of the 64th anniversary of the world’s first atomic bomb attack, the mayor of Hiroshima, Tadatoshi Akiba, urged global leaders to back President Barack Obama’s call to abolish nuclear weapons.

The United States is the only nation that has deployed atomic bombs in combat. So much as we cower from the prospect of a nuclear Iran or North Korea, American leadership changed the history of mankind forever with the ultimatum—drafted by Truman, Winston Churchill and the joint chiefs of staff—sent to Japan on July 26, 1945, demanding it “surrender in safety or face utter destruction.”

War is the ultimate battleground of human ethics and morality. Quoting the wisdom of Martin Luther King Jr.: “There is nothing more tragic in all this world than to know right and not do it.” Wiser still is the dictum: Those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it!

The Hunters Point Shipyard is located in southeastern San Francisco on a peninsula that extends east into San Francisco Bay. It is a federal Superfund site—one of the nation’s most toxic properties . The legacy of the shipyard in the creation, testing and delivery of weapons of destruction will not remain quietly buried in the depths of our conscience.

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Parcel D of the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard sites the historic gun mole pier and iconic gantry crane. Lennar Developers plans to site residential development adjacent to the gun mole pier.

According to documents on file with the Naval Historical Center, Capt. Lewis L. Haynes, senior medical officer on board the USS Indianapolis, recalls:

“On July 15th we were ordered to go to San Francisco to take on some cargo. I was amazed to notice that there was a quiet, almost dead Navy yard. We tied up at the dock there and two big trucks came alongside. The big crate on one truck was put in the port hanger. The other truck had a bunch of men aboard including two army officers, Captain James Nolan and Major Robert Furman. I found out later that Nolan was a medical

officer. I don't know what his job was—probably to monitor radiation. The two men carried a canister about 3 feet by 4 feet tall up to Admiral Spruance's cabin, where they welded it to the deck. Later on, I found out that this held the nuclear ingredients for the bomb and the large box in the hanger contained the device for firing the bomb. And I had that thing welded to the deck above me for ten days."

The historic gun mole pier and gantry crane circa 1947

According to Capt. McVay's recollections, ***"We sailed from San Francisco 0800 the morning of 16th July. We arrived in Tinian the morning of 26 July and unloaded the material and the bomb which was later to be dropped over Hiroshima."***

Little Boy replica on display at the Smithsonian

The components of "Little Boy," the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, were loaded onto the USS Indianapolis from the drydocks now designated Parcel D -the radiation contaminated Gun Mole Pier.

The fissile components of the bomb contained half the uranium-235 in the United States valued at trillions of dollars by today's standards. Little Boy dropped by parachute from the B-29 Enola Gay at 8:15am on August 6, 1945. It exploded with 15 kilotons of force, wiping out 90% of the city and immediately killing 80,000 people.

Christopher Carpenter was a worker at the Hunters Point shipyard in 2005 repeatedly exposed to toxic radioactive dust in soils and asbestos laden rock. In 2016 he died of peripheral T-cell lymphoma, a cancer not reported in an African American.

Carpenter is the principle plaintiff in the Hunters Point Community Lawsuit.

The gantry crane is the largest and most iconic landmark at the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard. Completed in 1947, it was surpassed in height only by the Oakland and Golden Gate Bridges as man made structures. As long as the Titanic and erected using 8.4 thousand tons of steel, the gantry crane is recognizable in the southeastern backdrop of the San Francisco skyline.

In 1959 Operation Skycatch was conducted by Lockheed Missiles and Space Division at the Hunters Point Shipyard to study dummy missiles structurally identical to live Polaris missiles. The gantry crane on the gun mole pier was equipped with arresting cables to catch multi-ton dummy Polaris missiles launched in mid-air and hurled out into San Francisco Bay and then retrieved.

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As the U.S. Navy prepared for the 2010 dirty transfer of radiation impacted buildings, equipment and infrastructure at Parcel D to the city, questions regarding the past, present and future of the shipyard were pushed to the forefront of public debate.

Radiation impacted sites at the shipyard have the potential for radioactive materials to be present and require further action. Impacted sites include areas where radioactive materials were used or stored, where known spills, discharges or unusual occurrences were documented and where radioactive materials were disposed of and buried, including landfills, laboratory drains and the underwater regions surrounding the base.

Parcel D comprises about 98 acres in the central portion of the shipyard. It was formerly part of the industrial support area used for shipping, ship repair, office and commercial activities. The docks at Parcel D were formerly part of the industrial production area.

In 1985 a tetrahedron shaped metal frame was attached to the iconic gantry crane to facilitate the testing of trident missiles that fell into the bay after reaching an altitude of 250 feet.

Portions of Parcel D were used by the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory (NRDL). NRDL was the premier radiation research laboratory of the post-World War II era. The main laboratories were located along Spear Avenue at the intersection of Parcel A with Parcels D and E.

Parcel A where approximately 300 families are sited in homes now known to be on radiation contaminated property on a federal Superfund site. Parcel A sits at the western boundary of Parcel D.

In July of 1946 Operation Crossroads series nuclear explosions were conducted in the Bikini Atoll lagoon in the Marshall Islands. A fleet of 71 surplus and captured ships were used as targets. The weapons used were Mk3A "Model 1561" Fat Man atomic bombs from wartime designs. Shot Baker was conducted on July 24, 1946 causing serious radioactive contamination of the lagoon and radiation exposure at the surface amounting to a lethal 730 R in the first 24 hours.

Shot Able was conducted on June 30, 1946. The standard Fat Man fission bomb fell short and to the left of target due to a collapsed tail fin. It sunk and severely damaged five vessels and led to a government investigation of the B-29 flight crew.

Several of those damaged ships were hauled back to the combined naval station at Hunters

Point and Treasure Island and at least one was docked at the gun mole pier...where Lennar Developers wants to site residential development in a shipyard south multi use district or "MUD" on a parcel designated Parcel G created like a "cookie cutter" from heavily contaminated Parcel D.

The federal law for environmental cleanup at the shipyard is the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, called CERCLA or **Superfund**. CERCLA defines radionuclides as particles that emit radiation. They are hazardous substances under CERCLA and, as such, must be investigated, characterized and cleaned up.

Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney and Senate candidate Cindy Sheehan show sisterly support for Dr. Ahimsa Sumchai at her fundraiser held in the SF Bayview's back yard on Oct. 6, 2007, during her campaign for Mayor of San Francisco. The first African American woman to run for Mayor, Dr. Sumchai's platform prioritized environmental health and justice, public safety and a moratorium on residential development at the Hunters Point Shipyard. Photo: John Morton

Radiation damages human tissue by stripping it of charged particles called electrons. Radiation in low doses is linked to many solid cancers including breast, thyroid, lung and skin cancer as well as cancers of the blood and lymphoid tissues. Radiation can change the basic structure of our genetic material and impact future generations. Radium 226 is one of the most abundant radionuclides of concern at the shipyard and the principle emitter of gamma waves. According to the Agency For Toxic Substances and Diseases Registry, Radium 226 exposure is linked to a myriad of health effects including anemia, fractured teeth, itching, dermatitis and skin ulcers, cataracts, cancer and ultimately, death.

The answer to the breast cancer conundrum evident in the world's highest incidence of breast cancer arising from San Francisco's Bay Area counties may be linked to our known exposure to low level radiation in air, water and dispersed soil from activities at the Hunters Point Shipyard.

Madame Marie Curie died of aplastic anemia due to prolonged exposure to the radium she discovered

Madame Marie Curie became the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in 1903 and the first person to win it twice. In 1911 she accepted her second Nobel Prize in chemistry for her discovery of radium. She saved the lives of thousands of wounded soldiers by advancing the use of portable x-ray machines during World War 1. She and her husband Pierre became obsessed with the glow in the dark fluorescent properties of radium. She carried test tubes of radium in the pocket of her lab coat and died on July 4, 1934 of aplastic anemia. Her daughter, Nobel Laureate Irene Joliot-Curie, died of leukemia.

The Navy has identified radiologically impacted areas at Parcel D associated with the former use of general radioactive materials, decontamination of ships and NRDL research. The sewers and storm drains beneath Parcel D were designated radiation impacted because the scientists of the NRDL were known to have poured effluents of low level radioactive waste down their

laboratory drains. These radioactive materials ultimately communicated in the 10 linear miles of sewer and storm drains with San Francisco Bay, the surrounding community and, ultimately, the entire Bay Area.

In February 2004 the Navy completed the Draft Final Historical Radiological Assessment for Hunters Point Shipyard. The Navy Radiological Affairs Support Office conducted extensive research on past radiological activities using both federal and personal historical archives. That research was supplemented by interviews with people who knew first hand of radiological operations at the shipyard.

Members of the Hunters Point Shipyard Restoration Advisory Board (RAB), including myself as founding chair of the Radiological Subcommittee, commented extensively on the three draft versions of the Historical Radiological Assessment. The HRA studied 882 sites at the shipyard and found that, while the majority were not radiation contaminated, Fifty-eight of those sites were found to require further investigation and cleanup and another 32 sites were pending release for unrestricted use.

By 2018 the radiation cleanup at the Hunters Point Shipyard had been coined “The greatest case of eco-fraud in U.S. History” by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility Executive Director Jeff Ruch. In a March 30, 2018 letter to the U.S. Navy, as well as state, regional and city officials, EPA Remedial Project Manager Lily Lee wrote that the soil tests on four land parcels transferred to San Francisco in 2015 were flawed by “potential falsification, data manipulation and/or data quality concerns”. The parcels EPA identified as suspect are adjacent to homes on Parcel A and Parcel D. The soil tests on the parcels demonstrate “a widespread pattern of practices that appear to show deliberate falsification, failure to perform the work in a manner required...or both”, according to Lee.

According to Ruch, “Documents emerging in recent weeks show that the radiation testing for soil covering most of the shipyard and it’s buildings are inaccurate and useless from a public health standpoint.”

Bay View Health and Environmental Science Editor Dr. Ahimsa Porter Sumchai can be reached at (415) 859–5471 or AhimsaPorterSumchaiMD@Comcast.net. Dr. Sumchai is a wikipedia editor for the Hunters Point Shipyard at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hunters-Point-Naval-Shipyard>.

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Originally published at sfbayview.com on August 31, 2009.

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